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A CO-OPERATIVE COMMUNITY STUDY

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The problem method of attack in the teaching of geography, as opposed to the ineffective traditional method of instruction, is becoming fairly well established in most progressive school systems. The fifth-, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade pupils of Decatur, Illinois, have just written and published a book of 192 pages entitled *City of Decatur*.¹ From the preface, written by the supervisor, one can see the reasons for initiating the project.

In planning the work of this book to be written by our upper-grade pupils, the supervisor wished to accomplish several things:

First, to assist in working out a geography project to demonstrate to the teaching body the feasibility of the problem attack in teaching and to help teachers get away from the traditional method of testing the assimilation of facts gleaned from a textbook—facts which often fail to interest the child because he has not the apperceptive basis with which to interpret things remote.

Second, (a) to set up a situation which would give the child as intimate an acquaintance as possible with his own immediate environment; (b) to build up the child's concepts through direct observation and actual experience so that he might have a more vivid and accurate mental image of that which must be gotten indirectly through readings and pictures; (c) to build up a body of principles in regard to city growth and importance which would enable him to apply the knowledge gained to other cities studied; and (d) to provide an experience appealing to the child's interest and motivating English as well as geography.

The following quotation from the Introduction written by the superintendent, Mr. J. O. Engleman, points out some of the educational values derived from such a study:

Education is life and must increasingly deal with life to be vital and significant. More and more must pupils learn to look beyond books and beyond the schoolroom for their subject-matter worthy of study. More and more, as they advance through the grades and the high school, do they need to study nature and man—nature in field and forest and soil and stream, and man on the farm

¹Copies may be purchased from the Public School Office, Decatur, Illinois, at \$0.75 per copy.

and in the city, man in his organized and institutional efforts to promote the social good which we call civilization.

Any city, any community, indeed, is a laboratory of greater or less excellence for such study. When rightly directed and pursued, such a study may be made to yield rich returns that may reenforce much conventional and traditional teaching of language, spelling, reading, numbers, and geography, but more than that, it results in a habit of mind toward institutions surrounding the school, widens sympathies, extends the mental horizon of pupils, and multiplies the school's points of contact with life in its various institutional forms.

In such a spirit, and with such a conviction, the study resulting in this book on Decatur was undertaken.

A reading of the table of contents will show the wide scope of the book.

Foreword. Spirit of Decatur

CHAPTER

- I. History of Decatur
- II. Decatur as an Educational Center
- III. Institutional Decatur
- IV. Industrial Decatur
- V. Decatur's Transportation Facilities
- VI. Public Buildings
- VII. Churches and Civic Organizations
- VIII. Decatur's Department Stores
- IX. Government of Decatur
- X. Beautiful Decatur
- XI. Decatur's Future

The information was gained through observation, study, and research. Where it was not practicable to visit a factory the necessary data were gotten by the pupils writing letters to the heads of concerns listing questions they wished answered or, as in many cases, inviting the persons to talk to them.

Old records, newspapers, and local histories were read that statements might be authentic. I feel confident from the untiring energy, interest, and enthusiasm on the part of the teachers who directed the work and from the reactions of the pupils that all concerned felt they were engaged in "a whole-hearted, purposeful unit of activity."

The introductory paragraphs of the few studies given below show how thoroughly the topics under consideration were discussed and developed.

DECATUR AS A RAILROAD CENTER

As a railroad center Decatur ranks second among all the cities of Illinois, Chicago, of course, being first. Of the various factors working together to establish this city thus high among the commercial cities of our state, the transportation facilities undoubtedly lead. It is true that the wonderful fertility of the surrounding area has caused rapid growth of many large cities which make a splendid market for our manufactured products. In this territory, surpassing any in the world in the value of its productive acres, agriculture is carried on extensively. This means that manufacturers of farm implements will find a splendid market for their products. Valuable land tends to create a general prosperity among the people living on it. Prosperous people coming into the city to buy and sell aid materially in its commercial development. Nothing, probably, has helped more in getting these outside people interested than the business men who through their aggressiveness arouse the people and make them aware of their city's commercial standing. But these two factors are of minor importance when we consider what the transportation facilities have done in developing our city commercially. A glance at the map will show us why we should be so fortunate. Centrally located in a rich territory, the city attracts builders of railroads. Lines crossing the state from north to south or from east to west pass through here. Not only is it centrally located in the state, but among the cities of the entire nation it stands almost in the center. As a result, traffic of all kinds must pass over these lines.

DECATUR'S WATER SUPPLY

When a family or factory chooses a new location, one of the most vital features of the place to be considered is its water supply. Water must be plentiful in case of drought or fire and adequate for the use of factories. It must be pure to prevent disease, and should be reasonably priced to keep down the high cost of living.

LEADER IRON WORKS

As people became more progressive, they began to pay more attention to the importance of proper sanitation and conveniences about their homes and began to demand better living conditions. One of the chief necessities in this progress is a water system.

The founders of the Leader Iron Works had a water supply system to offer to every farm and suburban home in the country which did not have the conveniences of a water system furnished to them by a city water works.

In looking for a desirable location the city of Decatur attracted the manager of the Leader Iron Works for several reasons. First, it offered as a railroad center excellent shipping facilities for the receiving of its raw materials which came chiefly from Chicago and Pittsburg milling districts, also for the shipping of its finished products to other cities. It also offered an available supply of

fuel close at hand. In addition to this, Decatur was located in the center of the great middle west agricultural section, which brought most of its products here for market, and having the advantage over many other manufacturing cities it offered good housing conditions for employees. This overcame many of the hardships encountered in the congestion of the larger cities.

The lesson plan given herewith is fairly indicative of the general method of procedure.

- I. General explanation of the plan for writing a book on Decatur.
- II. Discussion of our part. Class suggestions as to what our chapter should contain.
- III. Oral discussion, followed by written questions of points about which we would have to be informed. Such questions as these were asked: (1) How old is Decatur? (2) Were there any railroads when Muellers began? (3) What did Muellers at first manufacture?
- IV. Mr. Mueller's son was asked to talk to us. Children questioned.
- V. Discussion of Mr. Mueller's talk. Checking up to see if our questions were answered satisfactorily.
- VI. Gathering material from *Mrs. John's Personal Recollections; Mueller's Fiftieth Yearbook; Monthly Mueller's Magazine*.
- VII. Discussion of main heads for written work: (1) past history; (2) present history; (3) future possibilities.
- VIII. Under each of these heads were placed sub-topics as indicated in the paragraphs.
- IX. The proper arrangement of each paragraph was discussed. For example, which should come first, "The Invention of the Water Tapping Machine" or "Branch Factories."
- X. The outline was as follows: (1) Introduction; (2) Mr. Mueller in Germany; (3) His first business; (4) His invention; (5) Beginning of a factory; (6) Growth; (7) Branch factories; (8) Raw materials; (9) Employees; (10) Welfare work; (11) War work; (12) Muellers and the World's Fair; (13) Shipments; (14) Future plans; (15) Closing paragraph.
- XI. The introduction was written as a class exercise.
- XII. The class was divided into groups, each group having one or two captains. For instance, one group took No. 2; one, 3; one, 4. Each individual was to make his written contribution after an oral discussion in class. The business of the captain was to select from the papers of his group the best points and the best modes of expression. He checked the best points on each paper and rearranged them, probably using some of his own. Then the class checked up his paragraphs. The captain read it as a whole, then sentence by sentence. The teacher wrote it on the board and directed the corrections while all members of the class made suggestions. Then the paragraph was copied by two or three of the children. One was chosen to be kept by the teacher.

Form was about the only point judged here. This plan in general was followed in preparing the other paragraphs.

XIII. The next step was to read it as a whole and work for unity. The beginning and ending sentences were studied especially to show the relation between paragraphs.

XIV. Repetition of words such as factory, Mueller's, etc., were noted and substitutes were made. To shorten the chapter unnecessary material was omitted.

XV. Place geography. Pointed out cities receiving shipments, regions furnishing raw material. Constructed maps showing same.

XVI. Interesting discussions not included in the written report: (1) Picturing Decatur as Mr. Mueller saw it; (2) Draining land; (3) Prairie grass; (4) Growth of Decatur; (5) Supply and demand; (6) Education and Religion in foreign lands. Work of missionaries in promoting sanitary conditions; (7) Could the company afford to educate natives of Mexico and South America to a need of plumbing supplies? (8) What large factories are doing for their employees; (9) Why Muellers haven't an office in the West; (10) How Mueller's new location will affect southwest Decatur.

In writing of the values of this type of work one teacher says:

From the standpoint of geography we learned a great deal, such as the six essentials of manufacturing; the interdependence of our city and people and other places far and near; the value of being a keen observer of home conditions in and concerning a factory; the source and nature of the raw materials used; the location of places from which raw products come and to which the finished product is sent; a study of railroads and interurban lines and the density of population of the United States.

Another teacher says:

The fact that he paid them a personal visit in their own room, talked with them about his inventions and patents, that he was alive and really living among them, made their piece of work intensely interesting and, I feel, has meant more to them than any life they have read and studied in history books.

To say the boys enjoyed their part would be putting it mildly. One English period after the class had worked unusually hard in developing various words and phrases for certain paragraphs, I remarked that it was a difficult thing to do, but that we showed growth by accomplishing and mastering difficult things. One boy arose to his feet and said, "I don't call this hard work; I call it fun." I do not think there was a period devoted to this work that was not thoroughly enjoyed by every pupil present.

Another teacher says:

Each member of the class wrote an opening paragraph and was given a chance to read it in class. We decided upon the merits of two or three and had

the children put them on the blackboard. We culled, rearranged, added to and substituted other words until it met the approval of the class.

Bobbitt in his *Curriculum* advocates the development of a social standard of conduct which will enable capital and labor to get together in the right spirit and to see that their interests are inseparable.

The children have felt this, as is evidenced by the following:

One of the things that impressed me most in our work—The A. E. Staley Manufacturing Company—for the Decatur book was the loyalty and admiration of the pupils whose parents were connected with this company for the head of the firm. The children took particular pride in telling the things that Mr. A. E. Staley had done for his employees and not once was there any word that would indicate any dissatisfaction. As about half my pupils come from homes some member of which is employed by this company, it seemed remarkable. It was a splendid example of loyalty on the part of the employees brought about by the fairness and consideration of the employer, and, in this day of strikes and labor upheaval, it is well worth noticing. If the pupils have before them such examples, will not this tend to make them workers or leaders, as the case may be, who will stand for fair dealings and co-operation in work?

In their own words the children have said:

In this time of strikes, the A. E. Staley Company has not been affected by labor disturbances. This is due to the fact that this company is just to the employees, even to doubling the increase which union men were urging the employees to ask, and in this way the organization of a union was prevented.

Another way by which this company has showed its interest in the employees is the establishment of a store to reduce the high cost of living to the employees. This department is trying to serve the employees and this is appreciated by those employed because they get a good brand of goods at a lower price than they can be obtained elsewhere.

In addition to furnishing employees supplies at cost this company offered to put in the new impounding dam, which the city will have to do in order to have the necessary water supply, at the actual cost of labor and material.

This company has showed an interest in its employees socially. An athletic club and a band have been organized. An athletic park is provided by the company and financial aid given by the head of the firm. But the efforts of Mr. Staley do not stop at the plant.

He has encouraged the formation of a Home Bureau for the wives of the men employed by him and has offered a room for their use. Probably the influence of no one firm exerts as wide an influence in the life of Decatur as that of the A. E. Staley Manufacturing Company.

In writing of another factory the pupils say:

Within a few months this factory will be prepared to throw open to its employees ample sized lunchroom and restrooms with complete furnishings. This will afford for all those who participate in the comforts such opportunities as only a modern industry can extend to its employees. This means more rest and time for social intercourse among its employees.

"In what way will you share excess profit with employees—in increased wages or a bonus?" This was one of the questions formulated by the seventh-grade class in writing on Decatur's future.

It was the wish of the pupils to dedicate their work to the citizens of Decatur. Does not this show how much the personal interviews and letters from our citizens meant to them? Do they not show their feeling of gratitude to these, their "big brothers," when in the closing paragraph of the "Spirit of Decatur" they say:

The older citizens are leaving a rich heritage to posterity,—a city well organized as to government, well established business firms, good schools, beautiful parks, a growing university, churches with strong memberships, many and active civic clubs, up-to-date hospitals, secure banks and splendid homes. May the Spirit of Decatur use this heritage to promote a nobler, richer city in the future.

In the history, too, they express a similar sentiment:

A history of Decatur to be complete should contain some mention of those pioneer settlers who helped to preserve the nation's honor or served the country in some capacity. Indeed, there are few who did not do the latter. We have to our credit those who became historically famous, chief amongst whom are Abraham Lincoln, so rightfully called "a masterpiece of God"; Richard J. Oglesby, who served as major-general in the Civil War, as a United States Senator, and three times as Governor of Illinois; General Isaac C. Pugh, hero in the Black Hawk War, the Mexican War, and the Civil War; General Jesse H. Moore, who earned the rank of brigadier, given him by President Lincoln in April, 1865, for "gallant and meritorious service on the field of battle."

As to the latter, there were many of them—lawyers, doctors, preachers, school teachers, office holders, merchants, shoemakers, tailors, cabinet makers—all of whom served in providing for the comfort of the people and the development of Decatur, which is now a thriving city with a population close to fifty thousand, all of whom are engaged in pursuits which will tend to make our city continue to progress.

Can you imagine how much pleasure the following letter from the secretary of the Association of Commerce gave to Franklin,

one of our truants and incorrigibles, to whom this work made a strong appeal?

It is very good to know that the boys and girls in the public schools today are taking such an active and intelligent interest in the affairs of our city, because in a few years more the entire responsibility for the direction and management of these affairs will rest upon the shoulders of the same boys and girls who are now trying to learn Decatur's resources and needs.

Whatever our city becomes in size, in influence, in possessions, or in comfort will depend upon the wisdom with which we, today, and those coming after us may build. Too much attention cannot be given to our public affairs. Next to our homes, the city in which we live should receive our earnest and thoughtful consideration.

The value and attractiveness of the book are greatly enhanced by the art work—the cover design, title pages to chapters, and tail pieces. This work was done by the junior high school pupils under the direction of the art supervisor, Miss Effie Pearl Imes, and the special teacher in drawing, Miss Anna Mead.

One hundred copies of the book were hand bound by these pupils and given out as complimentary copies.

In the concluding paragraph of his introduction, Mr. Engleman writes, "May we not hope that this study will result in greater interest in the schools upon the part of Decatur's citizens as truly as in the greater and more intelligent interest in the city upon the part of its teachers and children." We feel that this will be true.